

Work and the state of mind

Because of its impact on workers' well-being and productivity, occupational mental health deserves more attention.

By KHAIRUL AZHAR IDRIS

MENTAL health and well-being in the workplace has become increasingly important and is getting much more attention than before.

It is now considered as important as physical and environmental health, mainly as a result of recent efforts by mental health professionals to promote awareness.

Although our understanding of occupational mental health is comparatively new, we now know it can seriously affect workers and may well be very costly to manage.

Mental health problems in the workplace can potentially cause mental illness and is a leading cause of absence due to medical reasons and of long-term incapacity for work, especially in developing countries.

People have to understand that the workplace poses considerable risks of mental health insults and psychosocial hazards. So what is occupational mental health?

There is no widely accepted definition currently, but it may be understood as the management and promotion of workers' mental health as applicable to the workplace.

This includes managing and promoting the synergistic cooperation and balance between the workers'

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and organisations' perspectives in fulfilling the mental health needs of the workers, and at the same time, reducing the organisational and workplace harms that may be hazardous to the mental health and well-being of workers.

In occupational mental health, the main aim is to achieve a balance in mental health capacity and maintenance. This has to be a joint effort by workers and management. Both parties should be working hand in hand towards the same goal – maintaining good mental health and well-being and strong productivity.

Occupational mental health arises from the understanding that the working environment and the nature of the work itself are very

important in influencing not only the health of workers but also the productivity and profitability that the organisation plans to record through the commitment of its workers and management.

Workers' physical, mental and emotional health outcomes are affected by their occupational mental health. This means it determines the organisation's productivity level.

Therefore, everyone should get to know the factors that influence, promote or hinder good occupational mental health and well-being.

There are three major components of occupational mental health and they interact.

Workers' form the first. Each of them has his own uniqueness, talent, personality makeup, resilience and even physical and mental health morbidity. All of these may influence workers' interaction with the workplace environment and vice versa.

The second component is the organisation's working environment, which impacts workers' capacity and well-being. The ways the organisation communicates with workers determine their perceptions and appraisals of the organisation and their relationships with it.

The third is the nature of the job

itself. The job may influence worker's ability to cope with its demands, which may be in terms of physical and mental strength, energy, time or money. The worker's readiness to handle the job may also depend on his qualifications, experience or level of job training.

What does the job or occupation have to do with workers' mental health and well-being?

Generally, the more working experience the worker has, the higher the added value to certain individuals and organisations.

But it is not as always good for the physical or mental well-being of the worker. Research has shown that long working periods pose considerable risks and hazards due to the hours spent sitting or standing and the sedentary work styles.

This contributes to the development of musculoskeletal syndromes and pain, psychosocial hazards, stress, burnout syndromes, anxiety, depression, and to a certain extent, a shorter lifespan.

Therefore, the management of occupational mental health should involve education and the prevention of psychosocial hazards.

There also ought to be more empirical and scientific data regarding workplace environment and health hazards. We need to study

how they interact and influence the workers' sickness and the organisation's productivity.

Last year, the Health Ministry conducted a National Health and Morbidity Survey and found that almost 4.2 million people in the country aged 16 and above had certain mental health issues. Five to 10 years from now, these individuals will be part of the country's labour force, if they are not already.

How will the Government's policies take this into account? Is there a national plan on mental health issues in the workplace?

In Islam, working is considered part of tawhidic manifestation and should be done properly and effectively because work is one of the ways towards meeting God's pleasure and forgiveness.

Allah said in the Quran, in Chapter 9, verse 105, which means: "And say: Work (righteousness), soon will Allah observe your work, and His Messenger, and the Believers: soon will you be brought back to the Knower of what is hidden and what is open: then will He show you the truth of all that ye did."

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